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AUTHOR Gates, Saundra
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ABSTRACT

Noting that faith communities play a vital role in connecting to families and children and often become involved in and supportive of education issues important in their local community, this document discusses the development of partnerships involving public schools and faith-based communities. The document compiles a series of talking points for use as overheads. The topics discussed include the following: (1) religious expression in public schools; (2) student prayer and religious discussion; (3) graduation prayers; (4) official neutrality regarding religious activity; (5) teaching about religions; (6) student assignments; (7) religious literature; (8) religious excusals; (9) released time; (10) teaching values; (11) student garb; (12) Equal Access Act; (13) the appropriate role of faith communities in public education; (14) what partnerships involving public schools and faith-based communities should and should not do; (15) reminders for volunteers; (16) starting a volunteer program; (17) ensuring effectiveness and targeting resources; (18) action areas for promoting children's learning; (19) helping children learn after school; (20) helping children learn to read; (21) helping youth prepare for college; (22) promoting a safe, healthy environment; (23) the Partnership for Family Involvement in Education; and (24) information and publications available from the U.S. Department of Education. (KB)

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Finding Common Ground: How Faith Communities Support Children's Learning

PARTNERSHIP
for Family
Involvement
in Education

U.S. Department of Education
Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
September 2000

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Partnership for Family Involvement in Education

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Richard W. Riley
U.S. Secretary of Education

G. Mario Moreno
Assistant Secretary
Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs

September 2000

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U.S. Department of Education
Partnership for Family Involvement in Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-8173

E-mail: partner@ed.gov
Telephone: 1-800-USA-LEARN (1-800-872-5327)
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Talking Points for Overheads

Overhead 1—Cover
Faith communities play a vital role in reaching out and connecting to families and children. As faith communities fulfill this role, they often become involved in and supportive of education issues of importance in their local community.

Overhead 2—Religious Expression in Public Schools
In the last few years, new and promising efforts have been made to end the division over the proper place of religion in our nation's public schools. Religious Expression in Public Schools: A Statement of Principles is a set of guidelines that can be used to inform students, parents, teachers, and other members of the community about the proper way to treat religion and religious topics in our nation's public schools.

Overhead 3—Student Prayer and Religious Discussion
The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment does not prohibit purely private religious speech by students. Students therefore have the same right to engage in individual or group prayer and religious discussion during the school day as they do to engage in other comparable activity. For example, students may read their Bibles or other scriptures, say grace before meals, and pray before tests to the same extent they may engage in comparable nondisruptive activities. Local school authorities possess substantial discretion to impose rules of order and other pedagogical restrictions on student activities, but they may not structure or administer such rules to discriminate against religious activity or speech.

Generally, students may pray in a nondisruptive manner when not engaged in school activities or instruction, and subject to the rules that normally pertain in the applicable setting. Specifically, students in informal settings, such as cafeterias and hallways, may pray and discuss their religious views with each other, subject to the same rules of order as apply to other student activities and speech. Students may also speak to, and attempt to persuade, their peers about religious topics just as they do with regard to political topics. School officials, however, should intercede to stop student speech that constitutes harassment aimed at a student or a group of students.

Students may also participate in before or after school events with religious content, such as "see you at the flag pole" gatherings, on the same terms as they may participate in other noncurriculum activities on school premises. School officials may neither discourage nor encourage participation in such an event.

The right to engage in voluntary prayer or religious discussion free from discrimination does not include the right to have a captive audience listen, or to compel other students to participate. Teachers and school administrators should ensure that no student is in any way coerced to participate in religious activity.

Overhead 4—Graduation Prayer and Baccalaureates
Under current Supreme Court decisions, school officials may not mandate or organize prayer at graduation, nor organize religious baccalaureate ceremonies. If a school generally opens its facilities to private groups, it must make its facilities available on the same terms to organizers of privately sponsored religious baccalaureate services. A school may not extend preferential treatment to baccalaureate ceremonies and may in some instances be obliged to disclaim official endorsement of such ceremonies.

Overhead 5—Official Neutrality Regarding Religious Activity
Teachers and school administrators, when acting in those capacities, are representatives of the state and are prohibited by the establishment clause from soliciting or encouraging religious activity, and from participating in such activity with students. Teachers and administrators also are prohibited from discouraging activity because of its religious content, and from soliciting or encouraging antireligious activity.

Overhead 6—Teaching About Religion
Public schools may not provide religious instruction, but they may teach <u>about</u> religion, including the Bible or other scripture: the history of religion, comparative religion, the Bible (or other scripture)-as-literature, and the role of religion in the history of the United States and other countries all are permissible public school subjects. Similarly, it is permissible to consider religious influences on art, music, literature, and social studies. Although public schools may teach about religious holidays, including their religious aspects, and may celebrate the secular aspects of holidays, schools may not observe holidays as religious events or promote such observance by students.

Overhead 7—Student Assignments
Students may express their beliefs about religion in the form of homework, artwork, and other written and oral assignments free of discrimination based on the religious content of their submissions. Such home and classroom work should be judged by ordinary academic standards of substance and relevance, and against other legitimate pedagogical concerns identified by the school.

Overhead 8—Religious Literature
Students have a right to distribute religious literature to their schoolmates on the same terms as they are permitted to distribute other literature that is unrelated to school curriculum or activities. Schools may impose the same reasonable time, place, and manner or other constitutional restrictions on distribution of religious literature as they do on nonschool literature generally, but they may not single out religious literature for special regulation.

Overhead 9—Religious Excusals
Subject to applicable state laws, schools enjoy substantial discretion to excuse individual students from lessons that are objectionable to the student or the students' parents on religious or other conscientious grounds. However, students generally do not have a federal right to be excused from lessons that may be inconsistent with their religious beliefs or practices. School officials may neither encourage nor discourage students from availing themselves of an excusal option.

Overhead 10—Released Time
Subject to applicable state laws, schools have the discretion to dismiss students to off-premises religious instruction, provided that schools do not encourage or discourage participation or penalize those who do not attend. Schools may not allow religious instruction by outsiders on school premises during the school day.

Overhead 11—Teaching Values
Though schools must be neutral with respect to religion, they may play an active role with respect to teaching civic values and virtue, and the moral code that holds us together as a community. The fact that some of these values are held also by religions does not make it unlawful to teach them in school.

Overhead 12—Student Garb
Schools enjoy substantial discretion in adopting policies relating to student dress and school uniforms. Students generally have no federal right to be exempted from religiously neutral and generally applicable school dress rules based on their religious beliefs or practices; however, schools may not single out religious attire in general, or attire of a particular religion, for prohibition or regulation. Students may display religious messages on items of clothing to the same extent that they are permitted to display other comparable messages. Religious messages may not be singled out for suppression, but rather are subject to the same rules as generally apply to comparable messages.

Overhead 13—Equal Access Act

The Equal Access Act is designed to ensure that, consistent with the First Amendment, student religious activities are accorded the same access to public school facilities as are student secular activities. Based on decisions of the federal courts, as well as its interpretations of the act, the Department of Justice has advised that the act should be interpreted as providing, among other things, that:

General provisions: Student religious groups at public secondary schools have the same right of access to school facilities as is enjoyed by other comparable student groups. Under the Equal Access Act, a school receiving federal funds that allows one or more student noncurriculum-related clubs to meet on its premises during noninstructional time may not refuse access to student religious groups.

Prayer services and worship exercises covered: A meeting, as defined and protected by the Equal Access Act, may include a prayer service, Bible reading, or other worship exercise.

Equal access to means of publicizing meetings: A school receiving federal funds must allow student groups meeting under the Act to use of school media—including the public address system, the school newspaper, and the school bulletin board—to announce their meetings on the same terms as other noncurriculum-related student groups are allowed to use the school media. Any policy concerning the use of school media must be applied to all noncurriculum-related student groups in a nondiscriminatory matter. Schools, however, may inform students that certain groups are not school sponsored.

Lunch-time and recess covered: A school creates a limited open forum under the Equal Access Act, triggering equal access rights for religious groups, when it allows students to meet during their lunch periods or other noninstructional time during the school day, as well as when it allows students to meet before and after the school day.

Overhead 14—The Appropriate Role of Faith Communities in Public Education

Faith communities, community groups and faith-based organizations can be great supports to the efforts of local schools and the families in the community. As part of this effort, it is appropriate that faith communities take an active role in supporting children's learning as part of a partnership with public schools and families. However, they may not proselytize in fulfilling this role.

Overheads 15 and 16—Partnerships Involving Public Schools and Faith-Based Communities Should...

- Make sure the program has a secular purpose;
- In selecting partners, remain neutral between secular and religious groups and among religious groups;
- Select student participants without regard to the religious affiliation of the students;
- Make sure any jointly sponsored activities provided within the partnership program, wherever located, are purely secular;
- Make sure any space used for the program is safe and secure for the children;
- Make sure any space used by the public school for instructional purposes is free of religious symbols; and
- Put the partnership agreement in writing.

Overheads 17 and 18—What Partnerships Involving Public Schools and Faith-Based Communities Should Not Do

- Do not limit participation in the partnership, or student selection, to religious groups or certain religious groups.
- Do not encourage or discourage student participation with particular partners based on the religious or secular nature of the organization.
- Do not encourage or discourage students from engaging in religious activities.
- Do not condition student participation in any partnership activity on membership in any religious group, or on acceptance or rejection of any religious belief, or on participation in, or refusal to participate in, any religious activity.
- Do not reward or punish students (for example, in terms of grades or participation in other activities) based on their willingness to participate in any activity of a partnership with a religious organization.

Overhead 19—Helpful Reminders for Volunteers

Volunteers always need to be thanked for their willingness to volunteer their time to help children learn. At the same time, it is very important to remind volunteers from faith communities that the purpose of any partnership is

educational and secular in nature, not religious, and that volunteers must respect the very strong First Amendment rights of students. The following are helpful reminders for volunteers:

- Do not pray with the students and families or encourage them to pray during your volunteer session with them.
- Do not preach about your faith to the children and their families while conducting your educational activity.
- Do not prohibit or discourage speech or other activity simply because of its religious content or nature.
- Do not infringe on the rights of students and their family members to speak about religion or to say a prayer or to read a Scripture, provided it is within the reasonable limits of rules for orderliness, talking, and congregating that are set for other speech and activities.

Overhead 20—Starting Your Volunteer Program

- **Identify the area in need by learning what services are already provided and identifying still needed services.** Is it part of the larger population, a particular age group, or an academic area? Validate your answer by making contacts with important community groups, your faith community members and local officials. Research services already provided in the community and identify areas where services are needed but not provided. Also, investigate if services being provided are experiencing more demand than the capacity to meet it or less demand than the resources allocated for it. This can help you to plan your program in accordance with community needs.
- **Establish lines of communication with the proper contacts.** Be sure to broadly invite input and be open about your plans, ideas and goals. Establishing good communication lines in the beginning gives an outlet for questions or problems that arise. It is essential that representatives of the public schools be invited to be a part of the planning team. Contact your school system's community outreach coordinator and local school principals.
- **Evaluate your capabilities to determine what you can provide.** Once you know the needs of the community that you want to address, evaluate the capacity of your faith communities to provide physical plant, volunteers, equipment, materials, transportation, funds, and the like. Commit to what you can reasonably carry out so that you don't over-commit and lose your volunteers. Make this commitment part of your partnership team, which should include representatives of the local

schools. Remember that you are offering a service to the children in your community through the schools. You will be more effective and reach the children who most need you if your plans are made in cooperation with school staff.

- **Make a plan based on your capabilities and execute it.** Upfront planning can be the key to success. And sticking to your plan—or modifying it and following the modification—helps keep everyone informed and makes it more possible for your goals to be met. Discuss the issues of school security and make a plan for screening all volunteers before they begin working with children. Set up a program for training the tutors and have the tutors meet the teachers of the students who will be tutored.

- **Evaluate and adjust the program each year.** Meet with those who were involved not only in planning but also in carrying out your program and hear from them about improvements that could be made. Be sure to hear from your volunteers, parents, teachers and other school staff, and the partnership planning team.

Overhead 21—Ensuring Effectiveness and Targeting Resources
The key to a successful, sustained community activity is to form partnerships in the community. The greater the number and diversity of people involved, the greater the chance of long-term success. Your partnership may start small—a partnership just within your faith community, with members acting not only as faith community members but also as parents, teachers, employers, community leaders, retired citizens and others. You may then want to expand your partnership to include other faith communities, local schools and school district staff, community groups, businesses in your area and others. Your resources and your local community will help you decide how to build your partnership to be most effective.

Overhead 22—Action Areas for Promoting Children's Learning

- **Offer before- and after-school activities.** According to the FBI, youth between the ages of 12 and 17 are most at risk of committing violent acts and being victims of crime between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. Surveys show that parents want their children to be involved in safe after-school learning and enrichment activities with opportunities to use technology; to participate in the arts, drama and music; to get extra help with basic academic skills; and to participate in community service. Faith community members can help students stay safe and be productive during the after-school time by starting or supporting extended learning programs in local schools and communities. Such programs provide wholesome activities and help schools and childcare

facilities open before and after school and in the summer as community learning centers.

- **Encourage early college planning.** For years, the college-going rate of lower-income students has lagged far behind the rates for students from higher-income families. Much of the gap stems from a lack of knowledge among many lower-income families about how to plan for a college education. Often, it is because they simply never have done it before. Faith communities can play an important role in this process. Through leadership and youth activity programs, faith communities can echo the high standards that schools and families set for students, encourage students to work hard and earn the best grades they can, connect them with mentors who will help them choose the right courses, and make sure that students and their families know about financial aid opportunities.

- **Help with crisis counseling.** A religious leader who is asked by school officials to participate in crisis counseling can provide a much needed service by responding to the concerns of the students at a time of great sensitivity. At the same time, a religious leader may not use the occasion to proselytize on behalf of his or her own faith or encourage a student to attend the following week's service.

- **Provide tutoring and mentoring programs.** An adult who acts as a mentor may not seek in any way to encourage or discourage the religious faith of the student whom they are mentoring for educational purposes.

- **Instill a love of reading.** Faith communities can play an important role by working with students who need extra help in learning to read. One way to do this is through The America Reads Challenge, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Education, to engage all adults—parents, educators, libraries, religious institutions, universities, college students, the media, community and national groups, cultural organizations, business leaders, and senior citizens—in helping to ensure that every child can read well and independently by the end of the third grade. Members of faith communities can help meet this challenge by providing resources and encouragement to parents in their community, collecting children's books to distribute to local families, volunteering in an ongoing reading effort in the local community, connecting to a public library's summer reading program, or starting a weekly family reading program at the faith community's facility.

- **Address school safety concerns.** The great majority of America's public schools effectively provide for the safety of children and youths on school grounds. But much remains to be done to make all schools

equally safe and to provide for the safety of children in their homes, their communities, and in their passage to and from school. In this time of concern—and even some fear—faith communities can build young people's sense of hope and security by helping parents slow down their lives in order to stay close to their children, particularly during the difficult teenage years, and by helping youths become a part of their communities.

- **Combat alcohol use, drug use and violence.** The best way to combat these dangers is to prevent them. Prevention programs are most effective when parents, students, law enforcement officials, and communities join together to fight back. Members of faith communities can partner with schools to provide mentoring and after-school programs, giving children safe havens from violence and alternatives to drugs. Faith communities can also help reduce violence by conducting conflict resolution workshops that teach children how to settle disputes peacefully and to respond when someone is bothering them.

- **Support early childhood development.** New scientific findings on brain development in very young children point to the importance of children's earliest experiences for getting them off to a strong and healthy start. Community and religious organizations can help children start on the right path by supporting programs that work with young children and their parents, offering educationally based childcare programs and special activities for children and their parents.

- **Bridge the digital divide.** The digital divide is a repetition in the area of technology of the gap that exists in other areas of our society between the haves and have nots. Today, computers are an educational tool that can help all our schools provide education and a tool for doing business that creates jobs. To help in the drive to make sure technology is available to all students, become a neighborhood center that offers after-school computer activities. Open your center to parents and young adults in the evening for job training and skills acquisition.

Overhead 23—Helping Children Learn After School

- **Publicize the need for safe, fun after-school learning activities.** Children of all ages, and especially middle school youth who have few options open to them, need safe and fun after-school activities. Perhaps your faith community is small and cannot provide these activities on its own. Your community can start an awareness campaign by word of mouth or by generating publicity to bring together many community groups who will rally around this need.

- **Help staff of after-school programs**. Your community may already have a small program for the after-school hours. Think how much more effective the existing program could be with additional volunteers, more space, new books, and appropriate supplies. By coordinating with existing programs, your faith community can extend its reach and enhance their effectiveness.

- **Organize and sponsor after-school activities for students of all ages.** Your faith community members and members of your broader partnership can find out what children are learning at school and reinforce that learning in after-school activities. By sharing expertise and talents, your group can make it possible for students to participate in the arts, perform appropriate science experiments, help others in the community, or engage in any number of fun learning activities, all in a safe, orderly after-school environment.

- **Teach technology and its uses for learning.** Your group can coordinate with schools and libraries to use their computer labs for special activities or you can establish your own computer lab by collecting and repairing donated computers and printers.

- **Support and help coordinate the use of college or high school students interested in teaching.** As tutors or homework supervisors, older students can help younger ones with their academic skills. The younger students get the extra help they need, and the older students get valuable experience as they plan their own futures. Use this as an opportunity to provide older students with information about available opportunities for careers in teaching and the steps involved in becoming a teacher.

- **Host or co-host recognition opportunities**. Recognition and award ceremonies in the arts, music, math and reading, for example, help reinforce academic achievement in school and throughout the community. Held in the after-school hours or early evening, they provide an occasion for children and their families to gather and recognize the achievements of their peers at school and in the community. Involve students in planning such ceremonies.

Overhead 24—Helping Children Learn to Read

- **Instill a love of reading in children**. By reading aloud to their children regularly and using TV wisely, parents and other adults in your faith community can empower children with the lifelong habit of reading. Holding family reading nights, story hours, and book exchanges can help families make reading a priority.

- **Encourage reading in your groups, schools and the community**. Host a read-in at a local school as a kick-off event. Coordinate with the school principal, librarian, and reading coordinator to organize the event. Invite parents, police officers, high school and college students, business people, mayor and community members to bring their favorite children's book to read to a class. Students can read their own favorite books to their classmates and the visiting community members. The talents of faith community members and other local partners can create a wonderful reading experience for children.

- **Be a volunteer tutor**. Members of your faith community can mentor and tutor both children and adults who need extra help with reading. Your community can adopt a school and your members can serve as reading tutors to those students. Or, you can start by hosting programs for members of your own congregation. Spread the news by encouraging participants to bring a friend. If your group is not ready to tackle a project of its own, plan to join an existing group. Many community and civic groups already sponsor tutoring programs and can always use extra volunteers.

- **Connect parents and tutors with reading experts**. Involve experts who can provide parents and tutors with guidance and training regarding the best way to help children learn to read. Effective reading practices can make the efforts of tutors and the support of parents and family members even more helpful.

- **Support high standards**. Find out about the state and local standards for reading achievement and the results of reading assessments for schools in your community. Join parents, teachers and school staff in supporting high standards and reward students who reach those high standards.

Overhead 25—Helping Young People Prepare for College

- **Emphasize the importance of working hard in school and of going to college**. Almost 90 percent of new jobs being created today require more than a high school level of literacy and mathematics skills. Earning a two-year or a four-year college degree makes a difference in lifetime earnings, choices and opportunities. Your groups can spread the word in the community about the importance of college and lifelong learning.

- **Host a series of "Think College Early" events**. Your group can join forces with school counselors, local colleges and universities, PTAs, religious groups, the Chamber of Commerce, local and state government offices, recent college graduates living in your area, and others to

sponsor meetings and activities to get information out to students and their families about the importance of planning for college early in a child's life. Members of your group and other caring adults can invite college officials, faculty members, representatives of groups that sponsor scholarships, or other speakers to talk with students and parents about college and what it takes to attend and graduate. Leaders from any field can talk about the education needed to succeed in their profession, and they can encourage students to visit local college campuses, send away for materials about colleges, and access information about colleges on the Web.

- **Help students take the right courses**. Students who take challenging mathematics courses, such as algebra in the middle grades, will be ready to continue in a college preparatory or tech-prep curriculum in high school, with courses such as geometry, algebra II, chemistry, physics and calculus. Your group members can tutor junior high and middle school students in core subjects, such as algebra and geometry, and provide helpful hints for getting through difficult school work.

- **Organize workshops to help with the college application process**. The college application process can be daunting for high school juniors and their parents. Your faith community can organize group sessions pairing new college applicants with helpers from the faith community. These volunteers can assist with filling out college application forms, student loan forms, and applications for scholarships. You can also conduct classes to assist students in writing required essays for their applications.

- **Build a school-college-community partnership to improve student achievement.** Your group can help connect area colleges and universities with middle and high schools to help improve student achievement and to encourage students to go on to college.

- **Launch a mentoring, job shadowing and internship program.** Started at the beginning of the school year, these programs can be a wonderfully positive experience for students and adults providing the mentorship. Your group members can serve as role models to students, starting in elementary school, so they receive the special attention needed to develop confidence in their abilities. Members of faith communities come from all walks of life. Your group can organize job shadowing opportunities for middle school students, allowing them to spend a day in the workplace with a mentor to experience the possibilities of different careers. At the high school level, students gain practical workplace skills and a greater understanding of their career options through internships.

Overhead 26—Promoting a Safe and Healthy Environment

- **Talk and listen**. Your group members can talk with children and encourage parents to talk with their children about the dangers of drugs, alcohol and tobacco. Started in the earliest years and extended throughout adulthood, these conversations could save lives.

- **Provide wholesome activities**. Be available to help keep schools open after school and in the summer as community learning centers. Sponsor alcohol- and drug-free activities and dances. Provide extracurricular activities such as sports, art, band, special interest clubs and field trips. Provide mentors, internships with employers and community service opportunities.

- **Regularly bring together children, youth, parents and other caring adults**. Your group can regularly involve parents and other caring adults, including law enforcement officials, in the lives of children and youth through mentoring and tutoring programs and through special events that bring together adults and young people.

- **Ensure that every child has a caring adult in his/her life by supporting parents and other caregivers and by providing mentors.** Members of faith communities can help ensure that every child has at least one caring adult in his or her life. Volunteers make a difference when they provide support and encouragement to parents, offer guidance to caregivers, and serve as mentors to children in need.

Overhead 27—Join the Partnership

The Partnership for Family Involvement in Education was started in September 1994 to encourage and support families' involvement in children's learning to high standards. The Partnership is a growing grassroots organization of schools, employers, educators, families, religious groups, and community organizations who recognize their interdependent role in supporting children's learning, improving schools, and raising student achievement.

The Partnership's mission is:

- To increase opportunities for families to be more involved in their children's learning at school and at home; and
- To strengthen schools and improve student achievement levels.

Because family participation in children's learning is often influenced by work schedules and time constraints, it is crucial that businesses,

community and religious organizations, and especially families and schools support parent and employee involvement in education. By taking into account all of the constraints on family time and staying child-focused, business, communities, families and schools can ensure to a much greater degree that the child will receive the support he or she needs. To encourage such support, the Department of Education administers the Partnership and offers resources, ideas, funding and conferences relevant to family involvement in education.

As a member of the Partnership, you will learn about new information, materials, and studies; be able to link up with other organizations working toward the same goals; and be a part of a national effort to encourage and enable families to be involved in their children's learning. Join now, and make a difference in the life of a child.

Overhead 28—Publications from the U.S. Department of Education

- Religious Expression in Public Schools: A Statement of Principles
- How Faith Communities Support Children's Learning in Public Schools
- Faith Communities Joining Local Communities to Support Children's Learning: Good Ideas
- Guidelines for School Officials, Volunteers and Mentors Participating in Public School Community Partnerships
- Partnership for Family Involvement in Education: Who We Are and What We Do

Overhead 29—Information from the U.S. Department of Education

- 1-800-USA-LEARN: for general information and referrals regarding education
- www.ed.gov: U.S. Department of Education Web site
- 1-877-4ED-PUBS: to order free publications from the U.S. Department of Education
- http:pfie.ed.gov: Partnership for Family Involvement Web site
- ed.gov/inits/religionandschools: Religion and Public Schools Web site